INTO THE

UNBEING™

PART ONE

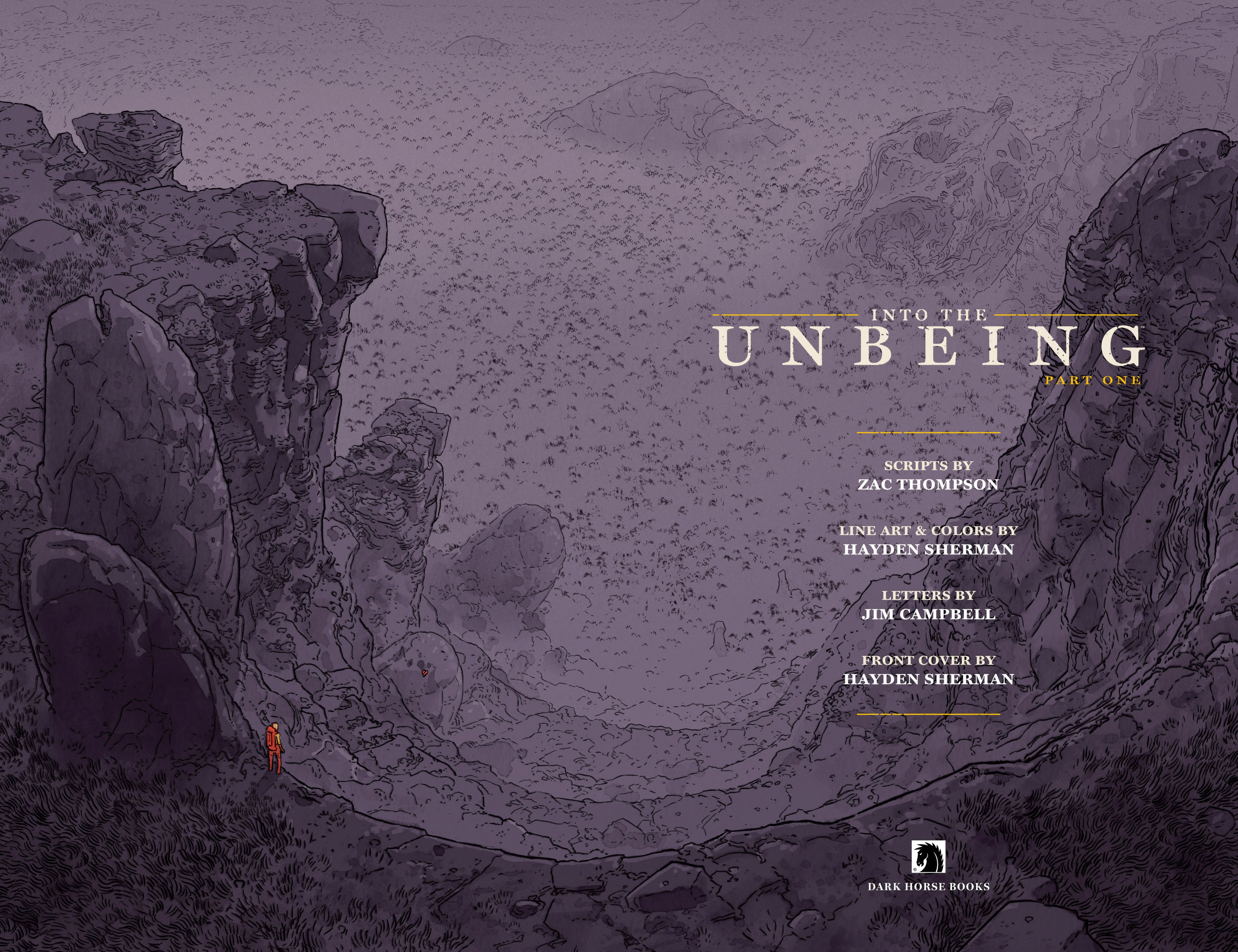


THOMPSON SHERMAN CAMPBELL

INTO THE UNBEING™

PART ONE





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INTO THE UNBEING: PART ONE
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COVER ART BY TYLER BOSS



There's a burn on the nape of my neck.

I'm mad about it.

But, at the time, it felt so...*normal.*

It seemed like another incoming wet-bulb.

The smoke, the heat, the masks. I was getting used to it.

Getting used to mass extinction.

Go-fucking-figure.

Sometimes, and I really believe this, so don't laugh, okay?

Sometimes we tune to the chaos of the world and ***witness*** something... meant for us.

I see this dying animal... and I realize...

...I'm running through the smoke, the flaming trees pass in a blur, panic making my ears ring...

...I must have been screaming...

Because I just ***knew...***

...I was too late.

I watched my ***whole life*** wither away and...I'm sickened by the reprehensible place that's left.

My husband and daughter... they're...***gone*** now, along with five hundred other people.

Trival in the face of the five billion plants and animals that went with them.

But in the aftermath I thought, *"this devastation will be a catalyst for major change, **right**?"*

2034. GIBSON'S DESERT, AUSTRALIA.

But *nothing* changed much. Except for *me.*

And *Galko* here.

We're the only two survivors from our town. A town that's disappeared off the map. So nobody talks about it anymore--

--Sorry. Fuck.

I brought the mood down *again.* Didn't I?

It's about time *they* got to know you.

No, darling. We've been here, together, for two months now.

Yeah.

Sorry for your loss.

How long after that did you join *S.I.N.E.W?*

Uhhh, hmm.

I started getting really angry and outspoken in 2026. Abby reached out...a year later?

Yes, that's right. ***We*** needed a talented Botanist.

Woah. Cool. Yeah.

I'm mad too. Really mad.

I guess, my story is ***sorta*** similar.

Maybe I just heard that jingle over and over. But maybe ***they're,*** I mean...

...We're the only ones funding the future. The situation with insect biomass is ***bleak*** and nobody is do--

THE SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE FOR NASCENT ECOLOGY AND WORLDS.

'Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new.'

Ping

Wasn't an Earthquake. We would've felt it.

How else would one explain those elevation shifts?

It's as if a new environment grew from the sand...

In seconds.

Whatever *it* is. It's massive.

The tectonic shifts have the trappings of a flash flood. Which again, we would've ***felt.***

I don't remember that mountain range being there.

That's because it's ***new.***

Sorry but mountains don't just ***grow*** from the ground...

...Are y'all messing with me?

No. Zara's onto something.

Reads like a basin opened *in* the earth. Look at the heat signatures, whatever's through that range it's... ***teeming.***

We ***must*** investigate.

No. Not necessary. We call it in.

That's a day from here in torrid heat.

I'm with Zara. No way.

We're in one of the world's wastelands, blazed by sun and fire, where almost nothing can survive looking at an entirely new environment!

It's our duty to ***S.I.N.E.W.*** No--fuck that--to humankind to go there and ***explore.***

Again, I don't think it will be necessary--

--I'm in command of this mission.

Start packing. We leave tomorrow afternoon.

We've been here nine weeks without phones or any other connection to the outside world.

A two day trip into the field will be good. Ultralight gear. Few personal effects. Just to...*look* at this.

The ascent should only take us an afternoon.

Sun will set as we descend into the basin. But I've got them packing for *anything.*

Free climbs, sample collection, portaledge camping...if we get close enough. *If,* we go *in.*

Forty dehydrated meals between us. More than enough water, if we're smart.

The hike may make *them* miserable but there's no other way to get close.

They're already miserable. Let them blame *me.*

Maybe I don't know how to do this?

They just need to trust me. *How could they when I'm screaming at them?*

I was too willing to share. Just to have someone listen.

Scientists don't often meet you at that level.

But I'm hoping *you* can.

Abby, The Surveyor, I've told you ***everything.*** How I resent ***E*** for dying. That I'm weirdly relieved ***T's*** spared of this obscene world.

I'm sure you're tired of hearing it.

But I can't keep going without ***you.*** You've helped me in more ways than I thought possible.

Paid off my debt. Cleaned up the rubble of my old life. You'll help me see this through. Whatever ***this*** is.

It's the ***other two*** I have to worry about.

Selva, The Entomologist, seems sweet. Dopey. Still binge drinking. Her research is sloppy but passionate.

Zara, The Geologist. Terse, rude, ***clearly*** comes from money. Can't trust her. But I can trust her work.

Second in command and I have no idea what she ***really*** thinks of me. People tend to ***resent*** authority. I know I do.

Granted, we're all professionals. Everyone got ready without protest. We're not here for ourselves.

If we focus, we can absorb the complexity of this moment.

If we work together, we'll make sense of this anomalous...basin... environment...

SKRTT

That terrain is ***shattered.*** The humvee won't go any further.

Okay, like it or not, we're finishing this on foot.

Four hours to sunset. We'll wet our clothes before we walk.

I've never seen a tectonic shift like this. It's massive.

But the formation is ambiguous. Not necessarily the same type of mountain found elsewhere in the outback.

Yeah, that's right. It's ancient. Similar to ***Uluru*** in that most of the bulk is underground.

Terrain is rough but it evens out after 6k. Then it's another 12k to the basin.

We can do that. Easy.

These rocks are remarkable. They look...Hadean age.

Listen up! We're going up and over that boulder field!

Galko, come.

I *feel* millions of tons of sulphuric acid dancing over us, protecting *us*, telling me *we* can do this.

Over that mountain is the quickest route to the anomaly.

We'll reach the peak around sunset.

We'll get a good look at what we're dealing with up there.

Take everything you need to make camp for the night.

Let's move.

The world's dying.

Shit. *My shoulder* is gonna hate me for this.

HILDUR - GRIEVING
ABBY - RELIGIOUS?
SELVA - UNEQUIPPED

:SNFF:

:SNFF:

Careful--there's ***thorny devils*** all over the rocks.

:huff:

:huff:

Great.

Strange flutter in my stomach.

Am I being *watched?*

Give me a hand, darling.

Shit, sorry.

No need to be sorry.

I just need to be more careful at my age, that's all.

Woah, look at those strange bastards growing among the bunchgrass.

So many trichomes on the lid. Amazing.

Wait, this is a giant ***cephalotus folicularis.*** Wow.

It has parallel morphology to other pictcher plants but bears no actual relation to them.

Its closest living relatives are tropical trees in South America...What's it doing here?

Pitcher plants only grow on limestone.

Typically they do and yet...here it is.

Well, take a sample and let's move.

SQUAK CAW BREEET SQUAK SQUAK CAW BREEET TWEET BREEET CAW SQUAK BREEET CAW TWEET

Woah.

What's wrong? What are--

--Quiet.

Look at that *lizard.*

That's no reptile...

Shoot it.

We're not going to shoot a defenseless creature.

It's just watching us.

I'll make contact. Slowly. End of story.

Hey, I'm not gonna hurt ya.

It... doesn't look like a tongue, it doesn't look like an emu either.

It looks as if it belongs *inside...* something.

Fuck!

Thing bolts faster than a dingo.

Pure adrenaline pulls me across the plains...

...and yet *here* I stop...

Lost in *a view.*

The landscape's fine details *elude* me...for reasons... that are difficult to parse.

But...the basin... *anomaly...*

...it's all that matters now.

How did a cave system of that magnitude just... *open*?

It's not a cave. Look at it... breathing with the wind.

Isn't that just an oasis? Right? Like water and wildlife wavering in the sun...or something.

But I *feel* like I can *see* swarms around it...

Whatever it is, *we* need to get closer.

Sending in a ping to *S.I.N.E.W.* satellites now. So they have eyes on us.

I see a line. Follow me.

If we walk all evening we'll still get a few hours of sleep in the shade. As soon as the ***sun rises,*** we go ***in.***

I don't tell ***them*** that... for reasons...that feel obvious.

You didn't protest.

You wouldn't have listened.

What do you think *it* is?

Possibility, a divine event, an omen...only God knows.

This landform...it's as if ***it's*** breathing somewhere beneath.

And I can't shake the feeling that it's observing me as I observe ***it.***

Everyone goes silent.

Something completely... irrational clicks into place.

Something I can't ignore.

This isn't a landform.

This isn't a basin.

This isn't an anomaly.

It is...or rather, was...a living, breathing, organism.

And we can all ***feel*** it.

Something *novel.* Look at it. How do you explain that long strip of overlapping scales?

Looks like a tongue to me.

I know you can feel it. This... thing was once *alive.*

And yes, Abby. *S.I.N.E.W.* stationed us out here to find something just like *this.*

If we're going in. I'm not doing it at night.

No way. No way. That's *not*... I'm not--

--we'll camp here for the night.

S.I.N.E.W. wanted us to find *this.*

And *what* exactly are we looking at?

It's a *cave.* A cave that looks like a face.

No. No. It's a type of... *organism.*

Sunrise is in six hours. I want us fully fueled and rested in five.

Are you serious?

Got it.

Relax, get some rest.

We're about to make the discovery of a lifetime.

07.20.34

Real inspiring shit, Hildur. Christ.

I exist in conflict. *Don't I?* Even out here. The others don't know what I'm most afraid to say. That I don't believe in S.I.N.E.W. Sure, they pulled off stratospheric aerosol geoengineering. They dimmed the sky and bought us some time. But...they won't publish what we find here. I'm not paranoid. They don't publish <u>anything.</u> Maybe they're incapable of cutting through the bureaucratic bullshit. Same thing I've seen in every other facet of my career. Science is dying. As long as S.I.N.E.W is committed to operating in this obtuse way—it's not to be trusted. Decentralized activism? How does that make sense? *Sounds like any other org giving capitalism a face.*

We're here, risking our lives for so little. That exploitation was on my mind with every step we took toward the...anomaly. That creature, the not rolled up tongue thing...the *cephalotus folicularis*. The facts...don't add up. And yet, I feel a holistic connection to the wildness of everything around me. Inside me. Before me. Like I belong here. Here where the world is devoid of the strange patterns we impress upon everything. Here under its amber eye.

The deep, undying truth in the back of my head, the one I want to ignore is the same staring back at me. Every human abstraction should be abolished. Companies, industry, fuck it. Burn it all. No more money, no more death. Everything around us belongs to everyone. This... belongs to everyone. *It's right there.* There's no need for anyone to own anything or be owned. Here, we're removed. We're free.

Just as everything ought to be. Just as <u>they</u> ought to be. I don't deserve to order them around. I fucking hate pulling rank. No one deserves authority over anyone. And yet...

I'm afraid of what will happen next. *It's lurking just outside.* Waiting for me. They'll turn on me tomorrow morning when I order them to go in. They'll bind, gag, and restrain me...just because they don't see what I see...

They're watching me now. Aren't they?

Thinking I'm a fraud.

Fuck 'em.

We're isolated in the driest inhabited continent on Earth...

...And we found novel ***life.*** *Nothing can be truly known about the world until I go inside.*

I'm camped on an uneven bed of iron oxide. Resting on grooves carved by winds over millennia.

The Earth's bones--prod into my back. *Knowing it's there, waiting, isn't enough.*

There's ***no*** soil here, few plants, and almost no water...

...and yet...***dew*** dances along my tent.

*It's **all** beckoning...*

...tune into the chaos...

...and even though I know, intuitively, nothing is out there...

...I can't help but *look.*

ARF ARF

ZIPPP

Wake up! Hildur's *gone!*

It's okay, boy.

Wind's picking up fast!

She wouldn't have abandoned Galko!

So where did she go?!

Where else?! She went inside!

She had no reason to go alone!

Let's turn around and call this in!

Looks like a sandstorm.

WARNING

Yeah, no shit!

Look, with Hildur out, ***I'm*** in command. Sun's about to rise! We won't survive the heat! This wind will rip us to shreds!

We've got to head ***in!***

Grab your gear and move! We'll be safe in the cave!

COVER ART BY HAYDEN SHERMAN



CHAPTER II
THE SPOILED HEAD

I want this moment to be a confirmation of... everything.

But let's be honest... it's meaningless.

I know the table is tilted. This environment is ***fucked*** and this... expedition is hopeless.

I know we're in a...***cave.*** Layered with decayed pollution. My best guess, synthetic oil.

Damn. This...place is insane.

Selva, quit gawking and take Galko. Look for a passage that leads deeper inside.

And I know our team lead is gone. Those are ***the facts.***

Abby, go with her. Find somewhere sheltered from the wind.

Sound thinking.

Wait. What are you gonna do, Zara?

I need to study these rock formations and collect a sample.

Are caves supposed to be this wet? This is a cave, right?

Yes and yes. They're often formed by water currents over a few millennia.

The air is... tingling.

Strictly speaking, everything around us is inert but...

The path ahead is blocked.

Shit...

...it trickles and breathes like it's alive. Don't be fooled.

Just follow the air. Find a way through.

I always thought of caves as like...dead places.

Never considered how they're formed or how things move through 'em.

I mean, I've studied tons of troglofauna in the abstract...

...but never in the field.

If we find a native beetle in here, I'm gonna freak.

...It looks diseased.

It does.

ARF! ARF!

ARF! ARF!

tak

These...*rocks* are harder than steel.

tak

tak

They chip like *enamel.* Odd.

This must be something...bacterial, fungal, that fused to the stone substrate.

So why are they arranged like...teeth?

A clear genetic abnormality. A mutation maybe...*just like human life.*

Wow...*something's* nesting up there...

RUMBLE

That's *not* a bird...

SKRONK

RUMBLE

PLIP

RUMBLE

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Cave in.

=HUFF=

=HUFF=

What's wrong?!

The path is blocked!

Get away from the wall!

SHUCK SHUCK

SHUCK

Come on!

How'd you think of that?

The walls look like...membranes. Feel 'em under your feet. They're not bat wings but they're springy.

Figured I could hack through it.

Yes, but...flesh doesn't grow in caves.

Depends on your definition of ***flesh.***

Consider bacterial and fungal species, one could reason that--

Uhhhhhhh. What now?

Lead with Galko. Bag on your stomach, brace the wall tight, sidestep slow. Focus on my voice.

Being alive is relative. isn't it?

No. Life is agency, purpose, and an awareness of the self.

Yeah... that.

On a long enough timeline ***everything*** is alive. Even rocks.

I see light ahead. Gonna be tight.

I'll take point.


GRR!

They'd see me differently if I told them what I *really* believe about this...

...cave.

That perhaps, somehow, we're ***inside*** a holobiont.

A cavity with some sort of... outer skin and indigenous population.

How, in the face of this...***creature*** we're nothing.

No more meaningful to it, than a single-celled aberration would be to us.

Barely worth registering...

...Right?

Hey!

Look at this!

These curious 'lil carrion beetles feed on the walls. I don't recognize the species...

...but what kinda cave decomposes?

ARF!

I don't know. Maybe it isn't a cave.

What'd you mean you don't know? What is going on?!

You're pushing us deeper and deeper into this... ***place!***

You're not even our commanding officer!

Where's ***Hildur!?*** If she went in here, where is she?! *Huh?!*

Remove your hands. ***Now.***

GRRRRRR...

KRAK

Oww. You coulda broke my thumb. The hell did ya learn that?

Military. And the answer to all your questions is, I don't know. I don't have answers. Nobody does.

Perhaps we're inside a massive whalefall...

In the desert!? Pretty sure we'd smell a dead whale!

Well, it's either an undiscovered species or a miracle.

Do you even hear yourself?

That's some dumbass bullshit. Aren't you a land surveyor? ***Survey!***

Watch your tongue, brat. You're only here because you have online *"fans"*.

And you're just fucking scared! Of a--

GRRRR

Enough! All of you!

We can't risk exposure to the wind. We gotta keep moving. And we're ***all*** gonna shut the fuck up while we do it.

Somehow, I'm the decision-maker. Again.

I don't care about these people. They ***barely*** matter.

I don't know why I'm telling *you.*

But the apocalypse already happened.

I witnessed it.

WYUP WYUP WYUP

Compared to the damage we've wrought, and continue unabated, we can't do ***anything*** to change our fate.

LOUISIANA. 2025.

Another offshore blowout. Thick, toxic tendrils reach along the coast for seven months.

The pollution spread inland. ***We*** were sent to clean it up.

Officially we were called the Civilian-industry Response Force. ***C-IRF*** for short.

Unofficially, we were paramilitary hired by Nautilus Oil.

ONE EARTH

GET OUT

The same company responsible for the spill.

The same company that employed my daddy his whole life.

Same one that denied his benefits after he was disabled on the job.

They needed these people off these beaches. ***They*** were offered millions for polluted property.

Idiots shoulda took the money.

Maybe it's sick, but I got my payout...

...But I wasn't prepared...to ***see*** what I saw.

An entirely novel mass... that moved in three dimensions...

...a wound so vast it could only be measured in a millennium.

We've choked the life out of everything just to find out if we matter.

And we ***don't.*** in deep time, we're trivial.

Our legacy is mass extinction.

Any other meaning we find is, at best, an abstraction.

There's nothing wrong with admitting it.

There's nothing wrong with ***me.***

There's nothing wrong with what I'm here to do.

I know this is scary but the cavity's just ahead. I can feel it.

I'm not sure why but *I know* I'm standing in a...

...skull.

Somehow, that makes sense.

They're organic. Definitely ***bone.***

Look at that, picked clean at scale.

A large biomass migration must've done this.

I feel eyes on the back of my head...

--Springy. These...***rocks*** aren't just scaffolding.

I'm legit creeped out.

The ground feels--

Whatever ate the flesh could still be in here with us.

So whatever we're inside ***is*** akin to a whale fall.

Hildur?

Their words are pierced by sudden panic...

Damn. He looks *ancient.*

Excuse me?

I just mean...

His gear isn't waterproof. Gotta predate the 1970s.

Kernmantle ropes...

...oxygen canisters. He's dressed for the cold...and had to have...*climbed* in here.

What? No. Maybe he's a caver. I don't know.

I'm pretty sure this man is *Harold Crichton.*

That's impossible. He disappeared in Nepal. On Lhotse.

Look at the color of his gear. It matches--

SHUT UP!

You're wrong. You heard Selva, that's impossible.

...Yeah.

Yeah.

Let's rest up. We'll reconvene at 1800 hours. If the storm's cleared, we head out!

I don't share my *findings.*

I don't share anything.

It wouldn't do them any good.

They're both on the verge of losing their frame of objectivity.

They're a danger to me and as soon as it's safe...

...I'm cutting them loose.

Guilt gnaws at me like a starving rat.

I can't lay on this bone any longer.

Adrenaline's got my heart rate up. That's all.

I've got to *look*. That's all.

I've got to know. Then I'll rest.

SHK

SHK

It's really *him*?

Harold Chrichton

April, 1968

After fifteen days of snow, I've found myself... lost somewhere within a labyrinthian cave system. Lhotse turned on me. Forced me into this... corner. The white drifts had a *different* bite. The snow chilled to the bone. The bitter winds enjoyed themselves as they pierced the down on my jacket. Now it, along with everything else in my pack, is rigid. Frozen. I was ice... until the carpet of white opened... and I felt eyes on my back. Slowly, I turned my frozen torso and looked across the endless white. Seeing a small red opening on the horizon. The steam billowing from within offered... hope.

I crawled on my hands and knees to reach that narrow hope. I believe somewhere in my chilled mind resides a memory of cutting into the Lhotse's rock face. Somehow I found a copper deposit. I have a vague memory of its foul, sour, odor... like sweet apple pie left to rot in the sun. it was a scent ill suited for the cold.

This blasted cave! it's enough to drive me to drink. It's difficult to track progress but I *must* press onward. The strange eyes on the back of my head are waiting for me to show some sign of weakness. But I won't. I can't. So within, I wander. Knowing something horrible follows me. Knowing... it's time to look...

As soon as my eyes focused - it moved with a frantic fright. So frenzied in its skitter that I couldn't discern a physical shape. But counted five legs, or perhaps eight. One leg had several jutting shin bones that seemed to extend toward nothing. While another leg had two feet which both hinged upon one ankle. As I scanned for anchors, my eyes rested on a torso that provided no clarity. The chest slowly... twisted. The... creature folded upon itself and exposed its spinal column to me, as if to hide its face. Along the spine were delicate holes oozing bile. Then, cresting the horizon of its horrid back rose velvet antlers. The sterling organs protruded from its shoulders, dewy in the hot air. From somewhere nearby yawned four arms, three of which were joined in a ring of horse hooves. The fourth arm, curled and stunted, jutted from somewhere near the oozing shoulder.

in a sense, I feel relieved. I must keep my eye on this beast. I must move with this creature. I have trespassed into its foreign world and the moment I slip up... it will devour me. So I will learn its every curve and become its master. I have no other choice.

This is why *they* want me to sabotage everything.

It makes me sick but...

...the world doesn't need this place.

Hildur is *definitely* dead.

Nobody will question a lone survivor.

Nobody will miss *them.* And they wouldn't be here if they had *anything* to lose.

Shit! Wake up!

It's another cave in!

Oh God!

Hurry!

Up here, this way!

How... the fuck?

RUMBLE

Were you climbing up here on your own?!

What? No.

Why are we going deeper?!

We've got no other choice!

C'mon, keep moving!

:wheeze:

Help!

:sigh:

Keep running! I've got her!

There's a clearing up ahead. It looks safe!

:huff:

:huff:

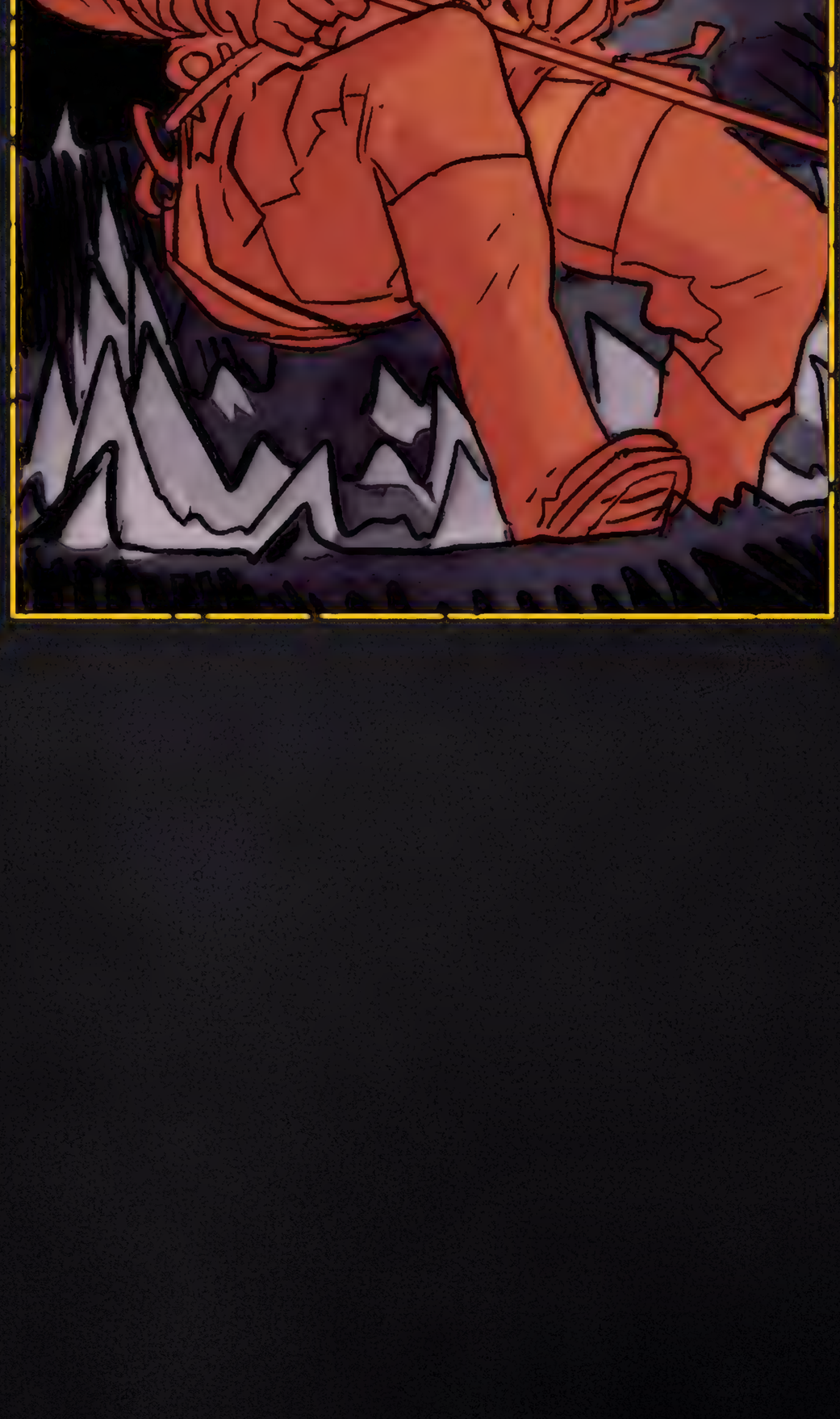
:huff:

:huff:

Fuck. It *looked* safe...

...what now?

COVER ART BY HAYDEN SHERMAN



Pinning was the only thing that kept me going.

Hanging with the dead made me feel something...axiomatic.

I started to understand myself through the eccentricities and morphology of insects.

Nobody else seemed to realize these tiny, fragile creatures carry the world on their backs.

Most live for less than a year. And still, *we* let them die.

Life isn't a given, you know?

It can be snatched away with the nip of a small mandible.

Before that, I found my lust for life in free soloing.

When you're dangling by a belay, you can't help but feel fragility in every fiber of your--

TAK TAK

--How long until they're secure?

Don't be scared, ***Abby.*** I made sure the anchors are solid and equalized. They're designed to be permanent.

Here, take ***the*** gun. Since you're leading.

Thanks.

The only way out is ***down.***

Selva... I...

Just breathe. You'll be fine. She's right.

They don't see it like ***I*** do.

The world is immovable. Hesitate and it'll ***break*** you.

TAK

The supports are redundant.

So just move nice and slow. Find a foothold and commit.

It's normal to be scared.

Dear God! I'm not--

--Fuck your God.

Focus on the climb!

Did I *really* just say that?

At least I can admit I'm terrified.

Fascinating.

The walls are like scabbed over tree resin.

It has all the markings of fossilization.

Take a look, Selva.

This 66 million-year-old fossil is a ***naked chrysopoid larvae.*** It even has a dorsal basket!

Hang tight. I ***need*** it.

thk

Gotcha!

S.I.N.E.W. ENTOMOLOGIST

Perfect.

Whoa. Hang on.

The skin is gelatinous but that blockage isn't...

Maybe this thing ***choked*** on a bone.

Yeah, maybe. Whatever ***this*** is, it's definitely related to the infection we saw above.

Never mind ***that.***

What the hell is ***nested*** down there?

Ahhhh!

ARF!

Someone shut that dog up!

ARF!

ARF!

Think I found a way out.

I need to stop this.

Don't anger the beast!

Now.

:SNORT:

BLAM

Selva, stop!

:GRHHHH:

Cut your line, hold your breath, and get in here!

Take a breath. Center yourself. Register the enormity of what's happening here.

We're tiny insect explorers, swimming *through* veins.

It's all so overwhelming, so disorienting.

But all I can wonder is...

SPT SPT SPT

...are we parasites or prey?

What just happened. Where are we?

We swam through blood. You okay, Galko?

=BORK=

Wow. Look at that...

CHAPTER III
THE FLOURISHING CHEST

TAK TAK

It's a looooong way down.

Let's conserve energy. We could camp *here* for the night.

Yeah. Let's regroup.

No. If that *thing* is following us, we gotta keep moving.

Just wait a second!

I'm tired of not having answers.

I'm tired of listening to *her.*

This biodiversity is insane.

It defies everything I know of the world.

And I won't look away.

I guess *you* can probably tell.

It's always been stuff like *this* that made me feel alive.

Only difference is *back then* I knew nothing about myself.

I just knew that I didn't *really* fear death.

And I certainly didn't *care* about *"the world"*. I didn't care about anything.

What's *that* up there?

I didn't think things like *this* actually happened.

It's a wash out! Slow down!

The current's too strong!

GURK

I don't even know how...

...But *I* was the only one who...

None of this *strains* it?

Not really. Or well, not since we've been inside.

You don't think that's weird?

No.

So what's your plan here? How long are we gonna keep pulling Abby along?

I could use some rest.

Fine. Let's portaledge here.

No way.

Me 'n' Galko vote for portaledge.

I suppose it's settled.

We're not thrilled either. At least it's tactically sound given the circumstances...

Let's get to work.

See? :huff huff: *Easy.*

TAK

:huff huff:

Okay, what equipment do we have left?

I've still got *four* MREs.

Same. My ropes took a beating. I broke a few belays. And Zara, *you* cut our lines back there.

I did that to get us *here!*

Ah yes, hanging like flies on scat. Great.

How long can *we* keep going like this?

At the current pace, we've got another day without water. But ***you*** led us down here. ***Why?***

Where were you going?

I don't know. I'm ***trying*** to find a way out.

Isn't that what you both want?

No. We should take our time and explore this...***place*** before--

--S.I.N.E.W. sent us here to study the environment and we ***must*** find Hildur.

She's probably dead, Abby! Let it go.

We don't know that!

Enough!

Selva, I've seen how you look at the insects here.

Yeah, ***they're*** exhilarating. But that ***animal*** back there--

--If it wanted to kill us. It would've.

It was just curious, Selva. Harmless--

What? No. Fuck that. We got lucky.

I want to ***live.*** To ***leave.*** First thing tomorrow, I'm doing just that--

--How the fuck do you expect to leave?!

Are you ***that*** dense?!

I won't listen to her reasons for explaining this away.

I won't apologize for wanting to survive.

The indignant shouting eventually fades.

It's replaced by the slow, sibilant howls of the hanging creature beside us.

A skittering hive. Of wind. Of wing. Of leaf and life.

Under its witness, I fold into the wall at my back.

My fingers feel the last breaths of the long dead.

Calming me. Reminding me.

I am ***not*** the first to be claimed by this landscape but...

...will I be ***the last?***

LET THIS BE A RECORD

...I WAS SOMEWHERE IN PATAGONIA. AMONG THE BAMBOO REEDS. AN EFFIGY OF OX BONES. STEAMING IN THE COOL NIGHT AIR. FLECKS OF MEAT LEFT ON THE MARROW, HANGING THERE. CHOPS TEASING MY STARVING STOMACH. DANCING ON MY EAGER LIPS. JUST A TASTE. IT WAS DAYS SINCE MY LAST MEAL.

COLLECTED THE MEAT. MADE A SIMPLE LEAN-TO SHELTER. RESTING ON A BED OF GLASSY MURK. TRIED TO MAKE FIRE. ATE THE MEAT RAW AND TAINTED. SHUDDERED ALL NIGHT. ALL THE HEAT INSIDE ME... EVACUATED. MORNING LIGHT CAME WITH A LOSS OF FEELING IN MY TOES. MY FOOT WOULD BE NEXT.

WENT TO THE RIVER. DESPERATE TO FIND FISH. FORTUITOUS THAT INSTEAD OF A RIVER, FOUND... AN OPENING. THE WATER SIMPLY DRAINED AWAY. ONLY A STEAMING MAW REMAINED, DRIPPING SOMEWHERE... BELOW. SOMEWHERE WARM AND WELCOMING. LIKE THE OX MEAT. WAS IT OFFERING SAFE PASSAGE OR ANOTHER TAINTED MEAL? I DECIDE SAFE REFUGE. SOMETHING ANIMALISTIC IN ME UNDERSTOOD TRESPASSING WOULD COST SOMETHING. BUT ALREADY HAD NOTHING. I CLIMBED INTO ITS EMBRACE. AND FELT NOTHING. GLOBS OF SWEAT OR SPIT WASH OVER ME. THEN, A CHILL DOWN MY SPINE. AND THEN, WARMTH.

IT SWALLOWED ME. NOW I ROAM. WONDERING IF I'LL EVER SEE MY FOOT AGAIN.

IT'S GOING TO SWALLOW YOU TOO.

STARTING WITH YOUR LEGS.
IT'LL SUCK AND DRAIN
THE MARROW FROM YOUR
BROKEN TOES.
IT'LL DISSOLVE THE BONES.
UNTIL NOTHING REMAINS
BUT YOUR MIND REMAINS.
STIRRED AND STORED
WITHIN THE FAT
OF THIS WALL.

It's...*day* now.

But I don't remember waking up.

Gorgeous, isn't it?

Easy to lose yourself in.

Indeed.

Sorry about last night, darling.

It's cool. Forget it.

What do you think *it* is?

It looks like...an ocean to me. But it's breathing like a giant jellyfish or like a big coral reef...

I... believe it's God's lung.

Are *we* sufficiently rested and fueled?

You're awake?

Didn't sleep. Would like to get on solid ground ASAP.

Fine by me.

Careful as you fold things up.

CRK TRK

Best to make a new set of anchors for the descent.

SHT

TWOOOOSH

No.

Fuck!

Not again.

Shit. Let's move.

AHHHHHH!

BY QOOOOOMB

No. No. No.

Gotta drop this weight.

PFF

:HUFF:

:HUFF:

I'm okay. I'm okay.

Huh?

CHEEP

CHEEP

How'd you little fellas get in there?

flick

Wow.

GLRP

It told me this would happen.

KRK

CRT

TK

COVER ART BY HAYDEN SHERMAN





BYOOOOOMB

Selva went through the *hole.*

I know. I saw it too.

You feel that underfoot?

Oh my.

CHP CHP CHP CHP CHP CHP CHP

Don't be barbaric.

Be still. Be calm.

Don't threaten *them.*

Wow.

GROK

No sense in disturbing the natural order of things.

That... hawk's been watching us for an hour now.

You think *that's* a hawk?

What else could it be?

Come. We've got to find Selva.

Even before my eyes adjust, I *know* she's down there.

Faith's powerful like that. It reinforces action, absolves indiscretion.

In the right hands, it can make one fearless.

Seeeelva! How far did you fall?!

=Uughhh= About four stories! Hurry!

It's dissolving my boots!

KZZZ

=hyerp=

What are we gonna do? She's in an acid pit? What if we--

--get a hold of yourself.

I'm climbing down to get you!

Don't you dare slip.

I won't.

Hold on for dear life.

SLOOOORSH

It took them!

No! No! No!

Shh, shh, shh. I've got you. You're safe.

They're... gone.

But they still feel broken...

Jesus wept.

It's a ***miracle.***

They're gone. Gone. Just like ***the wall*** said.

Selva, ***stop.*** Look at me, Zara's going to pull us up. Okay?

You'll go first.

GLLLUUUURRRR

ARF ARF!

Hey! Let's move out!

GLUUUUR

KRSHH

SKOOORL

Ahhh!

If *this* is how *I* die.

So be it.

Everything stings, burns.

An awfully sour, sickening odor leaks into me.

Is this punishment?

...Am I not enough?

CHAPTER IV
THE FETID PELVIS

Were... we just... *digested?*

I don't know...

Lord... God...

Thank *you.*

She's still breathing.

But, wow, *shit.* Her legs...

They were broken, clean, like that when I found her.

Doesn't look like a break...

So what?

So don't you think that's insane?

No. Like *all* things, it'll make sense on its own time. I'm more worried about carrying her.

We need to find solid ground. Somewhere we can stay dry. Make camp and let her rest.

Lead the way.

I'll carry her.

:SNFNFNFNFFF:

SCRTH SCRTH

Would you look at that...

It's ***Hildur's.*** She ***must*** be here somewhere.

S..N.E.W
RESEARCH J...AL

Hilduuuuuur!

I've made a life of rigid boundaries.

Determining topography, finding elevation points, calculating contours.

This looks prone to avalanches. Stay quiet.

Perhaps I'll rely on such data soon but there's too many tunnels, too many directions, much too much to account for...

CHF-CHF

...so I choose to move with an ***unseen*** pattern.

Because ***I*** recognize ***its*** undulating pulse.

Everything's soaked and spongy! Fuck this.

Easy does it. We'll find relief soon enough.

You're the surveyor, aren't you? When?

Just a little further. I'm sure of it.

:SNFSNFSNF:

Told you.

Let's move.

Ground is solid.

We can put a tarp between these two... trees, *er*... rocks.

I'll setup a tent and dry Selva off. She needs rest.

A-Agreed. We'll sleep in shifts.

Yes. I'm happy to stay up and--

--No. Just get some sleep...

VTTTT

"...I'll play lookout."

PtptptptpT

I can still feel them...

Shhhh.

Slowly, slowly. Don't strain yourself.

:Slrrrp:

"She's burning up..."

...like she's fighting off an infection.

Yeah. Perfectly normal given what happened. Well, kinda...

...her legs...they were dissolved...picked clean and sealed back up. ***What*** does that to a person?

Doesn't that bother you?

Not overly. I'm more concerned about her next few hours affecting our search...

What are you saying?

I suppose I'm asking, what do we do with ***her?***

I don't know...

She won't make it.

The moral thing to do would be--

--You're suggesting we euthanize her, Abby?

Where are you going?

I need a moment.

No, Zara. I'm no cretin.

It's just...a conundrum.

Well... whatever you decide to do...

...I'll follow your lead.

I grope for the knife in my pocket.

It's *still* there. Thank God.

Thank you for *this test.*

...THE RAIN. THE RAIN. THE RAIN. IT KEEPS COMING. IT NEVER REALLY STOPPED. I'VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE UNDER WATER. TREADING. ALWAYS TREADING. BUT I'VE MADE SERIOUS SACRIFICES TO BE HERE. SLEPT ON THE FLOOR FOR DAYS, NOT SHOWERING, NOT EATING, FEELING THE STRAIN IN EVERY LIMB, BUT GETTING UP AND DOING WHAT HAD TO BE DONE, TO LIVE, TO SURVIVE. AND ALWAYS, ALWAYS, SEEING SOMEONE OUTSIDE MY WORLD EXPLAINING IT BACK TO ME. IT NEVER FAILS. SOMEHOW EVERYONE ELSE KNOWS THE TRUTH BETTER THAN OUR GOD. WE'VE BECOME SO OVERWHELMED, SO OVERZEALOUS FOR SO LITTLE, SO DISTRACTED. IT MADE ME AFRAID. I'VE BEEN AFRAID FOR A LONG TIME. A LONG TIME. AFRAID I'D NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN.

THE RAIN STARTED LATE SUNDAY AND NEVER STOPPED. IT WAS AN OMEN. 2006 FEELS LIKE ANOTHER LIFE. AS IF IT HAPPENED TO SOMEONE ELSE. I SUPPOSE, IN MANY WAYS, IT DID. I DIED IN THAT STORM. I LOST EVERYTHING. JUST BECAUSE I WAS TOO DISTRACTED TO GIVE A SHIT. DID PART OF ME WANT IT?

I WAS WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT AT THE UNIVERSITY WHEN THE STORM CAME. UNDERSTAND THIS WAS BEFORE SMARTPHONES AND ALL THAT GARBAGE. BACK WHEN YOU COULD JUST LET YOUR PHONE DIE AND GO ON WITH YOUR LIFE. NOT THAT I HAD MUCH OF A LIFE THEN. A THIRTY-THREE YEAR-OLD SINGLE WOMAN. I KNEW I WAS GOING TO DIE ALONE. I KNEW IT IN MY BONES. SUPPOSE THAT'S WHY I DIDN'T EVACUATE. WELL, I DON'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHY, REALLY. I ONLY REMEMBER THAT I DIDN'T. BY THE TIME THE PANIC SET IN, IT DIDN'T MAKE SENSE TO RUN. MY CHOICE WAS MADE HOURS AGO.

I GOT STUCK DOWNTOWN. NEAR THE SLIVER BY THE RIVER. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE "BIG ONE". HOPING I'D MAKE IT THROUGH BUT STUCK FOLLOWING A CROWD. GOOD PEOPLE HOLDING UP IN A GOD-FORSAKEN SKYSCRAPER. I BELIEVE I KNEW WE WERE TESTING HIM. THAT'S WHY I GAVE UP. I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE IN THE BALLROOM. SLEEPING UNDER HOTEL SHEETS WITH ALL THE OTHERS. I WASN'T. I STOPPED BEING AFRAID. I FACED THE STORM.

THIRTY STORIES UP, I WATCHED THE BAY WINDOWS FLEX INWARD FROM THE WIND. HOPING THEY'D SHATTER AND RAIN GLASS. HOPING THEY'D CUT ME TO RIBBONS AND SUCK MY MISERABLE EXISTENCE INTO THE WIND. BUT...INSTEAD, THROUGH THE WARBLING PANES I SAW...SOMETHING...SOMETHING...THAT MADE MY WHOLE BODY NUMB. A TOWERING...SOMETHING...LURCHED IN THE STORM. AS MY EYES FOCUSED...I REALIZED WHAT IT WAS. IT WAS OBSCENE BUT...

...I saw *God.*

Cut off. Left to drown. I didn't know ***how*** to get home. The helicopters overhead never landed.

I'm failed by ***everything*** built to keep me afloat.

But ***I'm*** spared. Alive to witness gas fires burn holes between the stars.

To hear the hoarse cries of dying dogs. To smell the stew of rat-infested floodwater.

I joined *S.I.N.E.W.* They explain the crisis in stark terms. They ask me to make a pact for the future. I accept.

For the first time since the rain, I'm ***radically*** alive.

We storm a coal mine with Ende Gelände. We attack from several points, swarming like fingers.

We overwhelm everything with the mass of our bodies. We shut down production indefinitely.

We use similar methods to lead an uprising in New Brunswick, Canada.

We turn an Oil Refinery into scrap. We bought ***time*** for the planet...

...and they called us *terrorists.*

Don't remember going to sleep.

Morning... I guess.

It's bright beyond these... ***rocks.*** Feels strange to say as this...***body*** doesn't follow biological logic.

Indeed. It appears to follow environmental logic.

Exactly. But these stones speak to me. Galko's into them too. He basically led me here.

I think, if we listen, we have a real shot at truly understanding this...place.

Check it out.

See how they're worn away? The way they point?

I think they're leading us to water.

Good. We'll follow your map. I pray it'll lead us to Hildur.

Incredible.

But what about--

--Why don't you take the dog and get a head start?

O-okay.

Ahh, you're **awake.**

Here, darling.

You've got three days of food and water. Don't trivialize it.

But **we** need the tarp. I'm sorry.

=Heh= You God-fearing women are all the same.

This is life or death-- you know that. We're can't carry you over all this harsh terr--

You rotten bitch!

Stop.

I'm giving you dignity. So you'll understand.

What? Why?

Because we're here ***together.*** Inside ***God.***

And I'm glad we shared this experience.

I prayed ***S.I.N.E.W.*** would lead me back.

And here ***I*** am. Groping for the path ahead.

Knowing, deep down, God ***requires*** sacrifice.

Please, don't...

This will help us find Hildur.

Thank you, Selva. We'll tell the world about you.

Fuck you!

MONSTER!

AROOOO!

Galko! Woah!

Come back!

:huff:

:huff:

What is it, boy?

:SNFSNFSNSF:

Evenin' to thee.

Dunnah fret. I dunnah bite.

S'pose yee looking fer thine fran. Eh?

A nice feller. Eh?

Follow now. Eh, wah?

I...

She's jus' yonder.

Galko! Galko! Hi, buddy!

You found me!

You're alive...

I've adapted. Made some *new* friends. We've charted a course back to the surface.

You know the way out?

END PART I.

ZAC THOMPSON is a multidisciplinary writer from Prince Edward Island, Canada. He is best known for his work at Marvel Entertainment on titles like *Ka-Zar: Lord of the Savage Land* and *The Marvelous X-Men*. His debut original comic series, *The Dregs*, was called "lowbrow brilliant" by *New York Magazine*. In 2022, Thompson's original screenplay *The Replacer* was selected for production financing from Telefilm Canada. His other comic book credits include *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* for DC Comics, *The Body Trade* at Mad Cave Studios, *Cemetery Kids Don't Die* at Oni Press, and *Blow Away* at BOOM! Studios. When Zac's not out in the woods foraging for mushrooms you can find him at the cinema or walking his dog Astra.

HAYDEN SHERMAN is an award winning comic artist whose work includes *Detective Comics*, *Dark Spaces: Dungeon*, and *Predator vs. Wolverine*. They're a lover of sci-fi and fantasy who's very grateful to be drawing spaceships and cowboys for a living.

JIM CAMPBELL is one of the comics industry's busiest letterers, whose currently work appears in UK anthology *2000 A.D.* every week and in many fine books from BOOM Studios, Dark Horse, Image, Mad Cave, Oni, Titan, Vault and more. He lives, works, and very occasionally sleeps, in a small English market town with a nice pub at the end of the road.



COVER ART BY MATT LESNIEWSKI



COVER ART BY TREVOR HENDERSON



COVER ART BY JENNA CHA
WITH COLORS BY BRAD SIMPSON



COVER ART BY LUKE BAKER



PAGE 10 - NIGHT - 7 PANELS

Process commentary by Zac Thompson and Hayden Sherman

1. MEDIUM: Abby bends down in front of Galko. She's pulling HILDUR'S JOURNAL out from the mud. We see the words on the front cover "S.I.N.E.W. BIOLOGIST".

ABBY:
Would you look at that...

I wanted to remind readers of Hildur's journal and I wanted to be sure Galko was the one to find it.
-Zac

2. CLOSE: Abby's hand holding the water-logged journal.

ABBY:
It's ***Hildur's***. She must be here somewhere.

3. MEDIUM-WIDE: Abby's pointing toward one of the tunnels, already trudging forward. The water/liquid from above comes down like rain. It's going to be a miserable trudge.

ABBY (loud):
Hilduuuuuur!

ABBY (CAP):
I've made a life of rigid boundaries.

4. MEDIUM-WIDE: ZARA trudges through the muck and mire with SELVA (still unconscious) on her back. GALKO's tied to her hip, walking with them but sniffing everything. ABBY's about ten meters ahead, looking at the high dripping ceilings above as she tucks Hildur's journal into her jacket.

ABBY (CAP):
Determining topography, finding elevation points, calculating contours.

ZARA:
Damn. Okay. I'm gonna need to pace myself here.

Now in the surveyor's POV, it was important that we were in terrain that couldn't easily be surveyed.
-Zac

ABBY:
No sweat.

5. MEDIUM-WIDE: Abby and Zara trudge through brown, pillowly snow-like mud. They're breaking through it all right but it's going to be hard if it gets deeper. Behind them, or to their side we see a pile of BROWN SNOW along the tunnel wall, piled about ten feet high. It could come down at any second.

ABBY (small):
This looks prone to avalanches. Stay quiet.

ABBY (CAP):
Perhaps I'll rely on such data points soon but there's too many tunnels, too many directions, too much...

6. WIDE: Looking down from above: Looking down as Zara and Abby wade through waist-high piles of muck. They're working together to wade through the difficult terrain. Sevla's still passed out cold. In the cave ceiling, somewhere in the foreground we see a BLIND CREATURE watching them from the darkness. Something like a Star-Nosed Mole, with big claws, just hanging there, watching them. Not hunting or threatening beyond the implication brought on by its appearance.

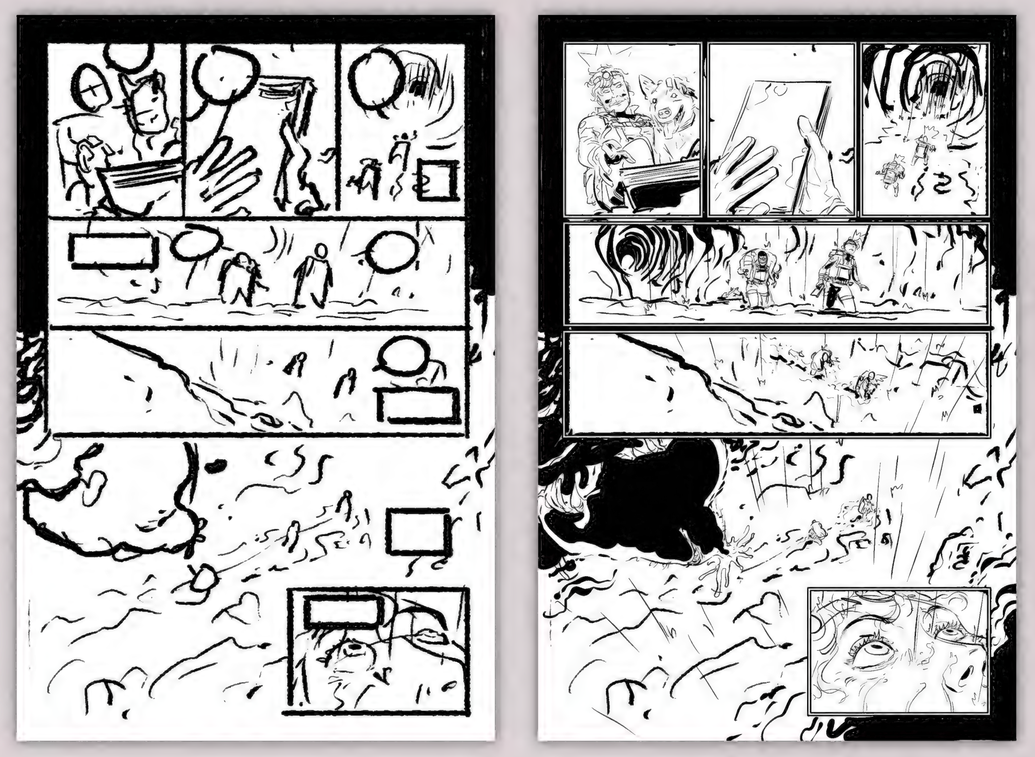
ABBY (CAP):
...so I move with an ***unseen*** rhythm.

CREATURE SFX:
>CHF-CHF<

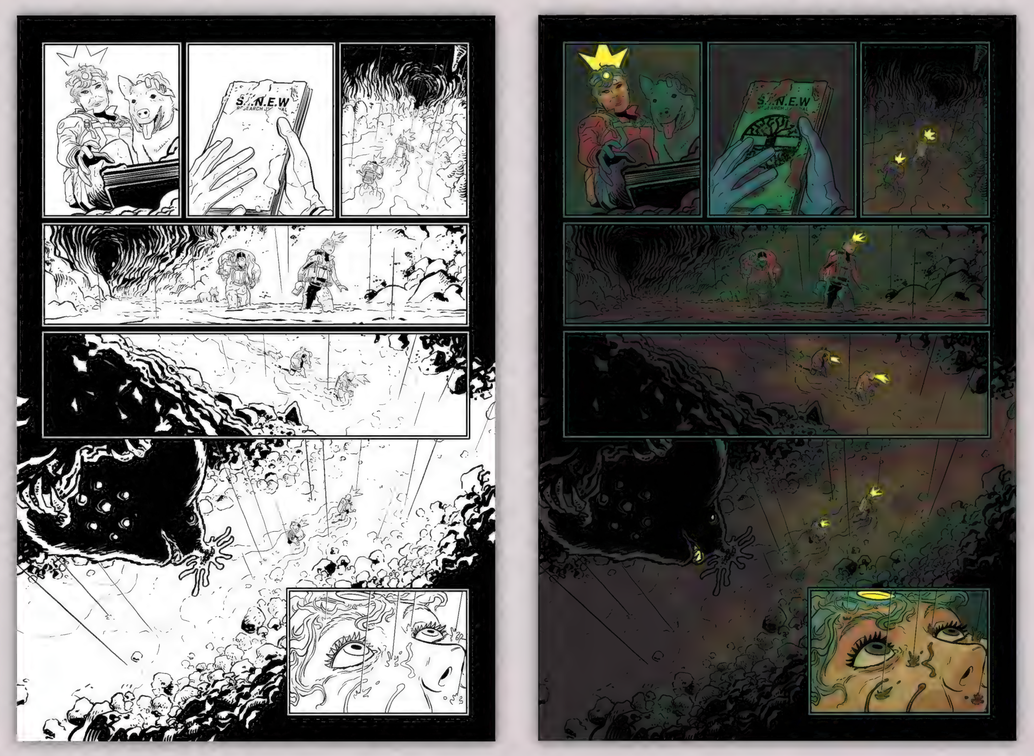
7. CLOSE: On Abby's eyes. Looking up at the ceiling. Brown rain smacking her face, beading down her cheeks. Her eyes are huge and hopeful in defiance of the dreary environment.

ABBY (CAP):
Because *I* recognize ***its*** undulating pulse.

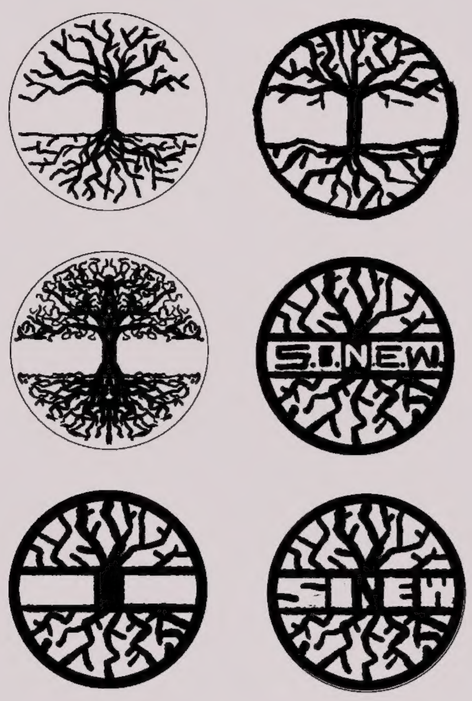
Close-ups on eyes were a recurring image in every script and Hayden always made them look magnificent.
-Zac



Each page is laid out in a fairly blocky way to make sure the scene's rhythm works. After that it's a process of further defining those blocky shapes into something readable.
-Hayden



Inks then define the page even further, here is where most of the detail is brought in. From there, the page is painted to bring out the full atmosphere.
-Hayden

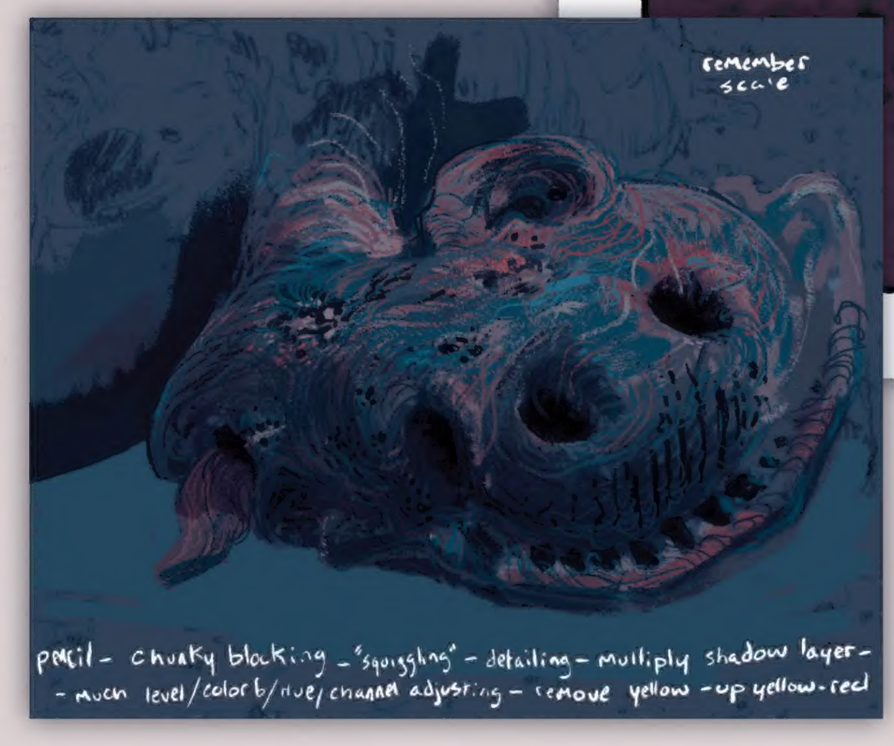


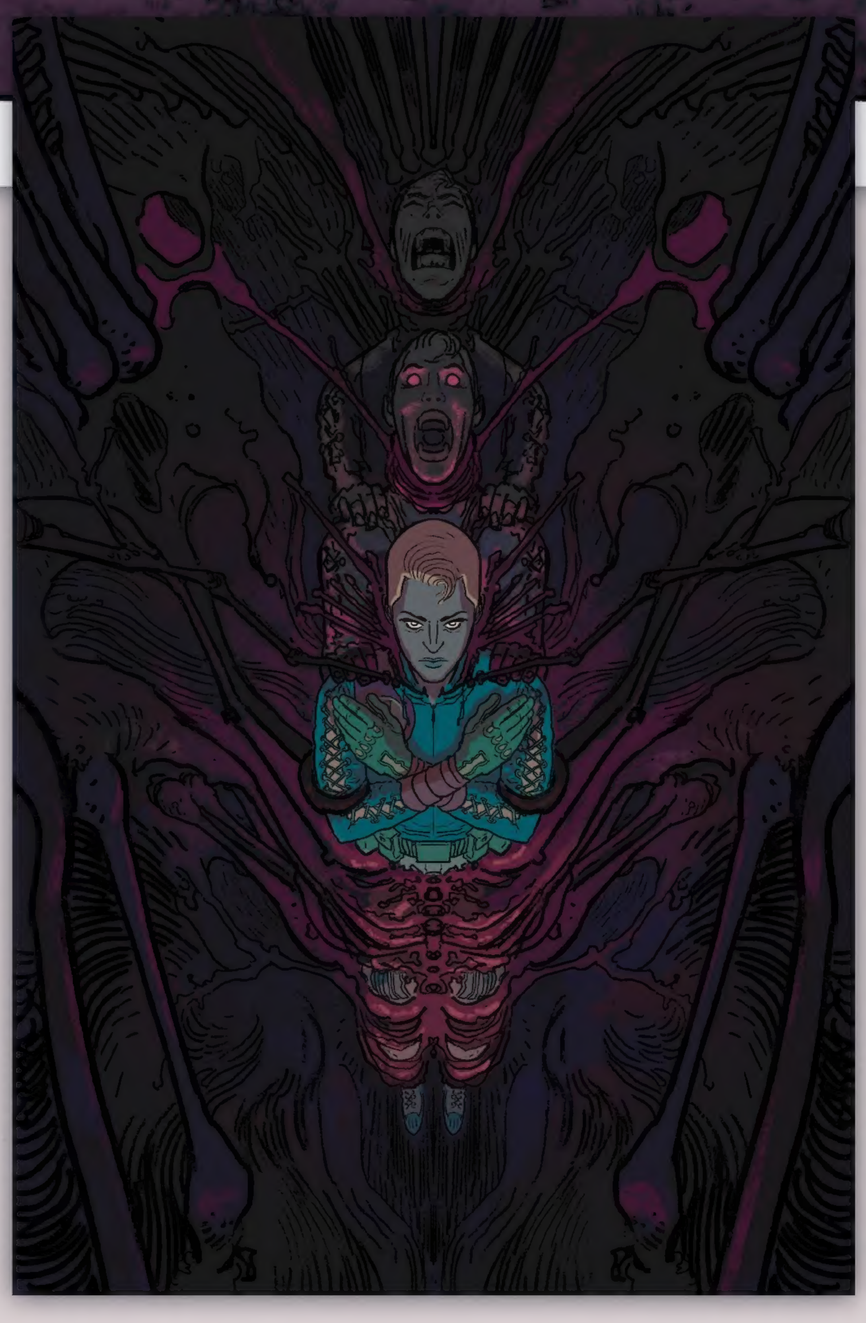


I wanted the logo to have an as above/so below design. It had to be simple enough that you could clock it from a distance.

-Zac







At one point in the development process I considered painting the whole book, without line-work. I tested it out on a few pages from our initial pitch, but found in the end it wasn't going to work as I'd thought.

From there I went through a number of style tests, looking for what would define the book visually. In time settling on the detailed pen nib and watercolor approach that the book now has throughout.

-Hayden

S.I.N.E.W.

A GROUP OF CLIMATE SCIENTISTS WORKING IN A REMOTE BASE CAMP ON THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK DISCOVER AN IMPOSSIBLE LANDFORM.

Led by botanist Hildur Johansson, the team sets out to conduct a routine exploratory mission to map the terrain, record their observations, and try to understand this anomalous landscape.

They arrive expecting the unexpected, and the Unbeing delivers. The expedition discovers a massive, entirely novel, giant holobiont that threatens to upend everything they understand about the natural world. Propelled by hubris and the intoxicating charm of forbidden knowledge, the research team descends into a hostile alien environment allowed to thrive without human interference. The beautiful yet unforgiving landscape hosts strange flora, gorgeous fauna and dangerous predators lurking in the darkness. As the team pushes deeper, can they survive long enough to find what they're looking for?

Into the Unbeing is an adventure into the sublime from the critically acclaimed writer Zac Thompson (*Cemetery Kids Don't Die*, *Blow Away*) and visionary artist Hayden Sherman (*Dark Spaces: Dungeon*, *Wasted Space*).

"Extraordinary. Grotesque in its beauty, personal in its global scope, claustrophobic in its grand carnal vistas."
- Jed Mackay (*Avengers*, *X-Men*)

"Alien *for the Anthropocene.*"
- Deniz Camp (*The Ultimates*, *20th Century Men*)

"Body horror taken to...titanic levels. A fantastic ride!"
- Patton Oswalt (*Minor Threats*)

DARK HORSE BOOKS

COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS/ Horror/ Science Fiction / Occult & Supernatural

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"

